THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Faith On The Margins

June 21, 1998
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Taking on the mystery is yielding to grace, letting go of all explanations, analyses, ideologies, self-images, images of God, agendas, expectations. Taking on grace is undergoing the finitude of years, hallowing diminishments, and living into the solitude of our own integrity. Taking on the mystery is undergoing the pain of learning that there are no empires...no theologies favored by the Holy One.... Taking on the mystery is acknowledging that we cannot name, though we try, we cannot claim the mystery, though we do. The mystery names and claims us, inviting us to take it upon ourselves.

Robert Raines
A Time to Live: Seven Tasks of Creative Aging

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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FAITH ON THE MARGINS

Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

On this warm Sunday in this wonderful city, O God, we have chosen to be together in worship: to lift our hearts and spirits and minds in praise and adoration and gratitude. And now we listen – for the word you have for us. Startle us with your truth and give us courage to respond to you and your word with lives transformed and faith renewed, and love kindled and ready to work in your world. Amen.

* * *

There are times, are there not, when the world seems to be filled with demons, devils, evil spirits, alien powers determined to sow confusion and chaos? People who prepare and print church bulletins know that sometimes, in spite of our best efforts and most careful proofreading, mistakes and typographical errors happen and successfully hide for a few days and then show up before God and the congregation on Sunday morning. It must be the demons!

It occurs so frequently that Martin Marty, in his *Christian Century* column, regularly recounts recent "Bulletin Bloopers."

A Methodist bulletin in Iowa advertised the annual church picnic, featuring "porn and beans" instead of pork and beans. Marty wondered if it helped attendance.

In a Dallas church bulletin advertising a child care center, the secretary changed a few letters in the word "tutoring" and it read not "tutoring" but "torturing" children.

The age of electronic communication is a fertile field for the demons.

> "To produce a bulletin for the funeral of a woman named Edna, the church secretary merely updated the bulletin from a prior funeral of a woman named Mary by using the computer's search and replace feature to replace the word Mary with the word Edna. Imagine...when the mourners, dutifully following along in the Apostles Creed, read that Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Edna." [*Christian Century*, 4/13/94]

A similar error happened right here when somehow the name of the composer of the first hymn dropped down and appeared in the last line of the Prayer of Confession, so that it read, "...all these things we pray in the name and for the sake of our Lord, Frederick Faber." Actually, we caught that one, but we've been laughing about it ever since and watching carefully for the evidence of demons at work.

Professor John Dominick Crossan says he doesn't believe in demons or devils but 70% of the people in the world do. And 2,000 years ago everybody believed in the existence and power of evil spirits or demons.

It is a strange story. Jesus is on the southeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, in a gentile region and he is accosted by a man believed to be possessed by demons. It's hard to imagine a person more offensive to Jewish people, more frightening to everybody, more on the margins of life than this man. He's a gentile. He's inhabited by evil spirits which cause him to convulse and twist and distort his features and tear his

clothes off, and behave in a way that terrifies everybody. His family has long ago given up on him. What the larger community does with people like this is chain them in the cemetery. There are no mental hospitals. There the pathetic character remains, unless, like this man, he breaks his shackles and wanders through the tombs, exhibiting his bizarre and terrifying behavior.

What's actually wrong with him? His age and culture called it demon possession. We would call it psychosis. We would say he is seriously mentally ill: acute schizophrenia perhaps, paranoid schizophrenia. It is our version of demon possession.

One thing we know for sure is his marginality: that he is absolutely cut off from his family and community. He's got a mother and father somewhere, brothers and sisters perhaps. But they don't understand him and don't know what to do with him, so abandoning him in the graveyard is the only thing they can think of to do. And therefore we can know another thing about him. Whatever the exact nature of his condition, it is exacerbated by his isolation.

It is a familiar dynamic. The majority of homeless people are sick. Many used to be in institutions. Many are on a program of drug therapy. When they don't take their medicine they get worse: their behavior becomes more bizarre. Already isolated from mainstream culture, now everybody ignores them; people won't even look at them. In time their behavior becomes more acutely antisocial.

Lee, the street artist, had money and an apartment. The city loved her. Tourists bought her pictures. Newspaper reporters interviewed her. But the community didn't know how to take care of her. Fourth Church was her refuge and sanctuary. When she forgot to take her medicine her paranoia became so severe that she literally could not come indoors, which in turn precipitated a whole host of other medical and psychological problems. Homeless people, we know, have an average of 7 to 8 chronic and untreated medical conditions.

That's what's going on in this text. And Jesus cuts through it. In the story, the man's demons recognize Jesus and beg not to be banished. But his authority is not just intellectual and pedagogical. It's the power of holy love. He has authority over these mysterious and frightening forces: banishes them to a herd of swine – this being gentile country – and the pigs stampede into the sea, the abyss – where all demons belong.

The locals, when they see what happened to the pigs and even more impressively, see the man sitting peacefully, clean, fully clothed, talking rationally, are so frightened that they ask Jesus to leave.

This is a healing story with a contemporary twist, but it is also a story about Jesus reaching all the way across the enormous gap between this man and the community and drawing him back in: Jesus simply refusing to accept and abide by the basic conventional rules his world used to order all of life.

That great theme: that Jesus Christ reaches out to include all people, even people on the margins of life, particularly those human culture, for whatever reasons abandons, rejects or condemns, reaches out and includes all of us in a new community created by that divine love that is the great theme of Luke's presentation of the Gospel. And for the same reasons that the townspeople ask Jesus to leave, human society has always had trouble with it.

We need, it seems, to know who's in and who's out, who's righteous and who's a sinner, who's acceptable and who's unacceptable, who's clean and who's unclean. We need, it seems, someone to be on the margins so we can know we are in the mainstream. Every culture does it – defines the norm – and then relegates those who do not fit to the margins. The man in the story is on the margins because he is sick and no one understands him or knows what to do with him. So were people with skin diseases, with physical deformities, mental incapacity. And he's on the margins because he's the wrong race, a gentile,

and he is also ritually, religiously marginal; he's unclean because of his daily contact with death. And the amazing grace of Jesus, the strong arm of Jesus' love reaches all the way out to those margins and restores him to the community. Did you notice at the end of the story that the crowd asks Jesus to leave? I think because he has just destroyed one of the organizing principles of the community's life. Now, because of what he has done, they have to learn to think differently about this man, more inclusively that is to say, and they do not want to do it. They are not the only ones in history to react in this way.

And did you notice the man's reaction? He's got clothes on, he's dressed properly, he's in control of his body. For the first time in a very long time he's thinking clearly and the first thing he thinks is that it is a great idea to get out of there, to leave the community and family that had treated him so poorly and relegated him to the margins. He wants to get on the boat and go with Jesus.

And did you notice Jesus' instructions? He orders the man to stay, to return to his community and family. Elsewhere the call to discipleship and faith is a call to pick up and move, to follow, to leave security and go somewhere else. But here, the call of faith is to rejoin the community and then tell the news of God's amazing grace and to be the inclusive community which communicates that love and acceptance and inclusivity.

It's a major biblical theme and it's one of the most important characteristics and implications of Christian religion. The barriers cultures build – barriers of race, religion, economic class, gender, are transcended by the love of this amazing man.

It was the first crisis for the earliest Christian church. In the first two decades after the crucifixion and resurrection, the word began to spread: the story of Jesus and his love was told by travelers, converts, preachers and the first missionaries. The best known of them was a man by the name of Paul. The crisis occurred when the story of Jesus and his inclusive love confronted the old law of Judaism which carefully divided the human race into chosen and not chosen, righteous and unrighteous, clean and unclean. The instrument, the barrier, was the religious law; if you kept it you were in. If you didn't keep it, you were out.

Well, Paul and other Christian missionaries went to the synagogues of the ancient Mediterranean world telling the story of the Galilean Jew who reached across the barriers, and taught that gentiles were not automatically on the margins, but are also invited into the community of God's people. Some said you could only do that if you first became a Jew, followed Jewish laws, customs, dietary restrictions. Finally, Paul eloquently and fervently articulated the radical implications of Christianity, writing to the church in Galatians.

> "In Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave, nor free, no male nor female...all are one in Christ."

There, of course, went the basic organizing principles of that society, "the three fundamental anthropological divisions known to his world, racial/ethnic, economic class and gender." [*Texts for Preaching*, p. 391] In Jesus Christ, in the community established and modeled by his followers, they are gone, transcended by a radically liberating love. In Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female.

This principle of inclusivity and unity and oneness and reaching out to the margins is the heart of Christianity. In our century the idea has shaped the focus of the church in the Ecumenical Movement, as Christians have discovered their oneness in spite of their differences; and the Civil Rights movement as human beings have experienced and expressed their common humanity in spite of racial differences, and the Women's Movement as women and men have experienced and expressed their equality and oneness in spite of thousands of years of official and religiously endorsed inequality and oppression, extending

right into the present tense, as our Southern Baptist brothers and sisters try to hold on to the old margins which Jesus transcends.

At the recent meeting of the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Charlotte, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, an organization I helped to found to promote a more inclusive, less restrictive, more graceful, less legalistic Presbyterianism, held a luncheon and asked Jack Stotts to speak about this important topic: unity and diversity, faithfulness and inclusivity. Jack is a retired professor of Christian ethics, seminary president, interim preacher and good friend of Fourth Church.

He referred to the Galatians text in a marvelous address, passionately delivered. The claim that Jesus brings people in from the margins, that Christianity is about our new unity, reminds us, Jack said, of our basic and shared humanity. Our basic human need, shared by every human being, to love and be loved, to forgive and to be forgiven, the common human hunger for righteousness and beauty and peace: the need to weep and to reach out to one another as we weep.

Jack told about the recent execution of Carla Faye in Texas and how her family and members of her victims' families were together, holding one another and weeping together.

A day later I was called from the floor of the General Assembly because news just arrived that the son of one of the Commissioners from Chicago had been killed that afternoon in a motorcycle accident. We gathered around her as she staggered under that worst of all news. Almost all of us parents ourselves, we stayed with her for an hour or so and held her and wept with her and prayed for her and each tried to express what St. Paul called our oneness in Christ which, in this moment, was our common, vulnerable humanness, our oneness in grief.

We're still struggling with the old issue of marginality and inclusivity, unity and diversity. The issue which today continues to divide Presbyterians and Methodists and Lutherans and Episcopalians is, as you know, whether or not homosexual persons, long on the margins of our culture, are included fully in the new community created by Jesus and whether their inclusion is also as ordained officers and clergy. There are, of course, biblical texts that prohibit inclusion, just as there are biblical texts that endorse slavery, and as the Southern Baptists reminded us, there are biblical texts to support the secondary status of women in church and society. And I am convinced that the issue is the old one; that Jesus transcends barriers, and that God's love reaches across cultural and racial and gender and religion and sexual orientation divisions and invites those on the margins to be part of the community, the family, the wonderful welcoming banquet of God's people.

To articulate it, to proclaim it to a world that continues to divide and subdivide people into nations, races, tribes, clans, denominations, gangs and classes, and which can be counted on to dismiss it if not oppose and attack it, to model it for the world is what the church of Jesus Christ is about.

In recent years there has been no division more intractable, and more heartlessly violent, than in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, Irish and British. And in the midst of the terrorist bombings and shootings, from both sides, there are occasional and beautiful reminders of the new community created by Jesus Christ.

In Lisburn, a town a few miles outside Belfast, there is a remarkable Presbyterian church. It's pastor, the Reverend Gordon Gray, has been a strong advocate for justice and peace and communication between Protestant and Catholic people in Lisburn. In 1983 a Protestant right wing paramilitary group planted a bomb near the church which caused major damage to the church building and blew out every one of its beautiful stained glass windows. The congregation repaired the damage. Someone thought to carefully collect as many of the shards of stained glass as possible from which a wonderful new stained glass window was created. They called it the "Resurrection Window."

And then in 1989 the IRA planted a bomb near the church which caused major damage and again blew out all the windows, including the Resurrection Window. And once again the congregation carefully and lovingly collected the shards and recreated the Resurrection Window.

That's the church of Jesus Christ. That's the determined, inclusive grace of Jesus Christ articulated and modeled in the world.

Gordon Gray tells about a whimsical third chapter in this dramatic tale that happened just a few weeks ago as the old conflicts heated up again. Police discovered a van loaded with 700 pounds of dynamite parked at the top of a hill above the church. The British Army bomb squad was called and a controlled and contained explosion was quickly organized. But it didn't work. Only the detonator exploded and somehow the van's emergency brake released and the van with the 700 pounds of dynamite started to roll down the hill, headed directly for the church, bumping to a stop at the curb directly in front of the church.

The Galilean Jew reached across the social and political and religious boundaries of his day and welcomed all sorts of people on the margins: children, women, blind, crippled, demon possessed, lepers, sinners, prostitutes, adulterers, money changers.

And Jesus the Christ, God's Son, the incarnation of God's grace and love, reaches across all the divisions and even all the barriers, arms stretched out on his cross, to receive and welcome all – you and me – to the new community, the new humanity created by his love.

This is not social or political, finally, but intensely personal.

This insistent love of his reaches across the biggest gap of all – between God and ourselves: a gap widened and deepened by things we have done or left undone.

A gap between God and ourselves widened and deepened by our inattentiveness, our willfulness, our intellectual and spiritual apathy.

A gap produced by our own sense of inadequacy, or weakness, or wrongness.

It is a gap, I believe, that produces in every heart a sense of marginality, a sense that our morality will never be adequate, our love never strong enough, our belief never complete enough.

And this insistent love of God reaches out to whatever margin you live on, or think you live on; reaches out and invites you in and offers you peace and healing and wholeness and the blessed assurance of unconditional love.

> Take my hand precious Lord,
> Take the hand of all of us.
> Join the hands of all of us.
> Take our hands, precious
> Lord, and lead us home.